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ABSTRACT

Designed for media specialists and educators, this issue includes five articles on innovative museum film programs. The first article describes a successful film program conducted at the Staten Island Children's Museum. The second article describes inventive children's programs at the Delaware Museum of Art. The programs use films and activities to stimulate children's interest in museum art collections. The third article offers a brief section on captioned children's films for the deaf. The fourth article reports on two Media Center for Children seminars. Seminar topics included research, books and films, underestimation of children by the media, film artists and art, the use of humor in film, and the potential effectiveness of nonverbal films. The final article presents an interview with Michael Siporin, an independent filmmaker known for his use of humor in films. (LH)

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Summer 1980 Issue

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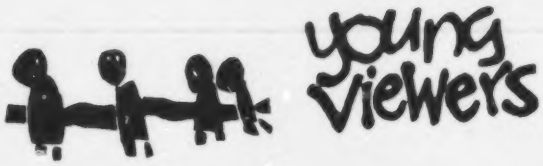
playing with film



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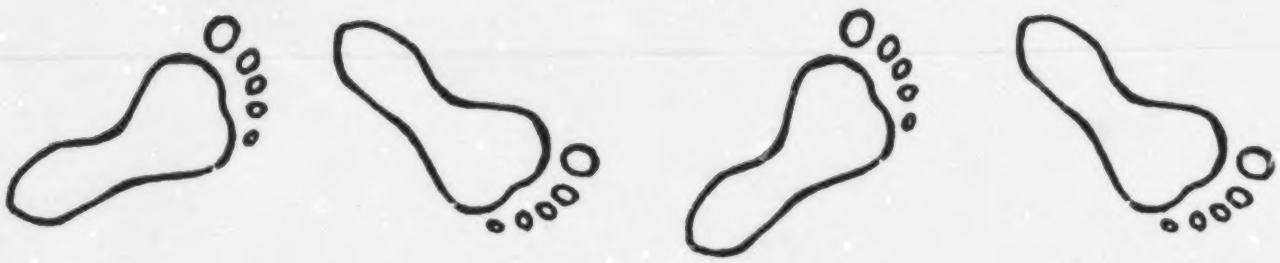
The cartoon on the cover was drawn by Michael Siporin.

This issue of Young Viewers continues to report on innovative museum film programs. Robert Bunkin describes a successful film program he conducted at the Staten Island Children's Museum, and completing her two-part article on using films with children in the Delaware Art Museum, Bonnie Levinson describes her programs in some detail. Ms. Levinson's article, "Playing with Film: An Approach to Programming", originally appeared in the book What To Do When The Lights Go On: A Comprehensive Guide To 16mm Films and Related Activities (Phoenix: The Oryx Press, 1980) and has been reprinted here (with slight additions prepared by MCC staff) with permission of the publisher.

In addition, there are articles herein on a helpful captioned film service, two recent MCC seminars, and an interview with an independent filmmaker.

The next two issues of Young Viewers will report on children's television, as well as children's film, and beginning with Volume 4 the Film Review Supplement will be incorporated into the regular quarterly issues of the magazine.



the staten island two-step:
participatory programming with film

by robert bunkin

As a participatory museum, the Staten Island Children's Museum uses film in a variety of ways. Films have played a vital role in all aspects of programming. They are employed as an extension and reinforcement of our exhibits, thus making each visit to the museum and the exhibit a new experience.

Our current exhibit, "Hocus-Focus" deals with visual perception and how artists use visual and perceptual phenomena in their work. Weekend film showings were chosen to relate specifically to this theme. Next year's exhibit will deal with four ethnic groups who settled on Staten Island; we plan to show films then that deal with other ethnic groups, as well to extend the focus of that exhibit. This sort of topicality does not limit the kinds of films we show, because we interpret given themes variously. For example, we might show a folktale from the land of origin of a given ethnic group, a documentary about the ethnic group, or works by a filmmaker of that ethnic background. Sometimes, films have also been integral to the museum's exhibitions. An animated short, THE LIGHT FANTASTIC PICTURE SHOW, by J. P. and Lillian Somersaulter, is installed on continuous view in our "Hocus-Focus" exhibit as a demonstration of motion in art.

Several Types of Screenings

Typically, screenings last less than half an hour and are followed by a workshop which uses the film as a catalyst. Animated films are used extensively because animation is a technique kids love and it has a "hand-made" look that is not found in live action films.

In one program, called "Fancy Footwork," we screened two animated dance films: Co Hoedeman's MATRIOSKA and Norman McLaren's DANCE SQUARED. These films were chosen because they dealt with concepts found in the "Hocus-Focus" exhibit: pattern and shape. The screening was followed by a discussion of how dance and visual art both employ shapes and patterns. Once these ideas were clarified, children were given crayons and large sheets of white butcher paper to trace their feet in colorful patterns. This way, correlation between steps in a dance and a motif in a pattern was established, and the resulting artwork resembled an Arthur Murray dance diagram gone mad!

Another program featured Steve and Marion Klein's A LITTLE GIRL AND A GUNNY WOLF and Maurice Sendak's WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE followed by a workshop in which the audience invented their own beasts. Each child was asked to "become" the beast s/he drew by making sounds their creature would make.

Another film/workshop program involved a guest artist, Jorge Toro, who showed three of his animations. One film, THE MAWKISH PIDDLER, was created by scratching and drawing directly on the film. After showing the films, a long work table was set up. We laid clear 16mm film up one side of the table and down the other, and allotted each of the fifteen children about three feet. The kids drew directly onto the film with permanent magic markers. When they had finished their segments (after about ten minutes), we unrolled more film and repeated the process. The resultant two and one-half minute film was screened on completion, with the addition of a tape of African music I had prepared.

A Workshop Series

Cameraless animation has always had a personal appeal for me, so I decided to offer a weekly workshop dealing exclusively with this technique which would be open to children ranging in age from eight to twelve. The workshop was held once a week, after school, for five weeks during the spring of 1980 and ten children attended.

As a technical introduction, we discussed and defined six film words (animation, frame, sprockets, sequence, 16 millimeter, emulsion side) which I wrote on a large sheet of paper, with illustrations, so that the meanings of the words would be graphically evident. For example, to illustrate the characteristics of the emulsion side of a film, I took two identical strips of construction paper and glued them to a sheet. I put a piece of scotch tape over one to make it shiny and invited participants to feel the two strips and note the difference in texture and appearance. "Emulsion side" was written beside the untaped strip, identifying which side of the film should be scratched in order to make a movie.

This quick vocabulary lesson was followed by a

(continued on page 16)

playing with film (part two)

inventive children's programs at the delaware museum of art

by bonnie levinson

[These programs are a continuation of Bonnie Levinson's article "Playing with Film: An Approach to Programming."]

Before listing the films, I should explain that in these early stages of program development I ordered films from the local public library and brought them back to the museum to preview just before screening them with kids. I would pick them up on Thursday or Friday afternoon for a Saturday program, and while prescreening them I developed the activity. Before this, when I ordered particular films from the library catalog, I had some idea of what I wanted to do, but as the films were screened I developed the logistics of each program--the order of the films, and the activity that would be most appropriate.

SERIES #1: Spring 1978
Target Audience: children ages three and older, as well as their parents.

Program #1: Arts Activities: Bring Your Crayons
Overall Objective: to have kids and their parents feel comfortable in the museum. At the beginning of the session I gave them an orientation to the film series which was particulary effective for the parents. Thirty-five people attended.

CURIOUS GEORGE RIDES A BIKE 10 min WESTON color iconographic animation 1958
Curious George the monkey has some adventures that even good intentions can't help resolve. Most of the three-year-olds brought in Curious George dolls and were happy to have their dolls in the museum and to see Curious George on the screen.

ALEXANDER AND THE CAR WITH THE MISSING HEADLIGHT 13 min WESTON cutout animation 1966 (Peter Fleischman/West Germany)
A young boy finds an old car, fixes it up, and takes a trip with some friendly animals through the jungle where he plays with a beautiful black princess.

THE DAY THE COLORS WENT AWAY 10 min EBE color nonverbal animation 1971
A little girl angers the water colors in her paint kit and they get up and leave to play on a rainbow, taking all the colors of the world with them.

Comments: I was worried about having three-year-olds with twelve-year-olds in the same room, but it worked out fine because the twelve-year-olds were very helpful with the little ones. Our activity involved using crayons and scissors. Kids created backdrops for their own film.

Program #2: Come Explore the Museum with . . .
Overall Objective: to acquaint children and parents with the museum. Thirty-seven people attended.

NORMAN THE DOORMAN 15 min WESTON color animation 1971
The film is about Norman, a mouse who lives in the cellar of the Majestic Art Museum. He enters his wire creation in a contest, and his dream (winning first prize) comes true. The story seemed a wonderful hook for giving the kids a tour of the museum and introducing them to what a museum is, particularly because Norman, as part of his prize, is taken on a grand tour of the museum.

HAROLD AND THE PURPLE CRAYON 8 min WESTON animation 1974 (Gene Deitch/Czechoslovakia)
Based on Crockett Johnson's book, Harold draws himself in and out of adventures by means of his magical purple crayon.

Comments: Originally, I wanted NORMAN THE DOORMAN to be the first film in the first program but it worked out perfectly here because kids felt more comfortable in the museum and were eager for a tour.

Program #3: Maurice Sendak Special--Reading a Film
Overall Objective: to pursue the correlation of books with film, particularly because the Delaware Art Museum is very strong in illustration. Seventy-nine people attended.

WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE 8 min WESTON animation 1973 (Gene Deitch/Czechoslovakia)
When Max makes mischief and is sent to bed without supper, his room turns into a jungle where wild things live.

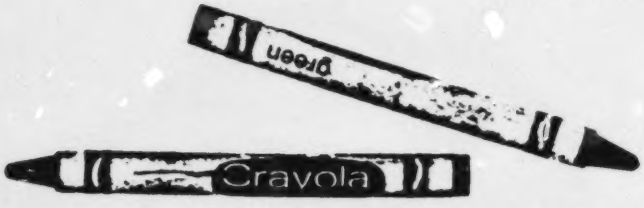
REALLY ROSIE 26 min WESTON color musical animation 1976
Several of Maurice Sendak's books have been set to music, composed and sung by Carole King.

Comments: Parents and volunteers were a great help with this program. We split into three groups to read the books. Then we saw the films and went to "read pictures" in the galleries afterwards.

Program #4: The Red Tour
Overall Objective: to explore the various shades and uses of red. Ninety-eight people attended.

THE RED BALLOON 34 min MFI nonverbal liveaction 1956 (Albert Lamorisse/France)
This highly cinematic film concerns the adventures of a red balloon that befriends a young French schoolboy. There is minimal French dialogue, but the film works on a nonverbal level.

Comments: This was the only film shown, partly because it was a long film, and partly because it fit in so well with what I was trying to do. I instructed everyone to come dressed in red, and they did. Kids led the adults on a Red Tour of the museum.



Program #5: Exploring Howard Pyle's "Mermaid"
Overall Objective: to explore the Howard Pyle painting.

THE LITTLE MERMAID 25 min PYRAMID color animation 1974
An animated adaptation of the Andersen story. It wasn't a great film but it tied in very closely with the collection and the three- to ten-year-olds loved seeing the mermaid on the film and then going to find a mermaid in the museum.

Comments: This was a simple concept but it worked particularly because we had the painting in the museum.

Program #6: Feature Film
Overall Objective: to expand the children's film viewing. Fifty-seven people attended.

SKINNY AND FATTY 54 min McGRAW-HILL b&w liveaction 1969
Kids really enjoyed this portrayal of the growth of a special friendship between two Japanese boys: Fatty, an unpopular and awkward child, is befriended by Skinny who teaches him a great deal about friendship and about how to stand up for himself.

Comments: I didn't plan an activity with this film because of its length. Also, there were times I had to be away from the museum.

Program #7: Starring the Sleeping Beauty Painting
Overall Objective: to explore the Edward Burne Jones' painting "The Council Chamber." Seventy-two people attended.

THE STEADFAST TIN SOLDIER 14 min MFI color puppet animation 1955
This film has to be one of the strangest I've ever shown. It is true to the Hans Christian Andersen story but it really disturbed the children when the puppets ignited themselves.

THE SLEEPING BEAUTY, BRIER ROSE 15 min BFA puppet animation 1970 (Katja Georgi/West Germany)
A well-done but slow-moving animation of the traditional fairytale. This version includes the slaying of a dragon and is notable for its elaborate medieval palace sets. The imagery was so similar to the painting "The Council Chamber" that it was amazing.

Program #8: Fairytale Films
Overall Objective: to screen a program of fairytale films. One hundred six people attended.

THE DRAGON'S TEARS 6 min McGRAW-HILL color animation 1962
A Japanese story in which a dragon terrifies a village except for one little boy who invites the dragon to his birthday party.

THE EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES 12 min MFI color puppet animation 1958
The Hans Christian Andersen story of a vain emperor and his gullible courtiers.

THE FROWNING PRINCE 9 min MFI color animation 1960
The animated tale of a prince with a perpetual frown who meets a princess with the ability to make him smile.

THE FIVE CHINESE BROTHERS 10 min WESTON color iconographic animation 1958
Adapted from the book about five clever brothers who avoid execution.

Program #9: Journeys
Overall Objective: to screen a series of films that had something to do with journeys or adventures. Seventy-four people attended.

PADDLE TO THE SEA 28 min NFBC liveaction 1966 (William Mason/Canada)
The odyssey of a hand-carved wooden Indian in a canoe as it travels downstream during the course of a year from Canada's northern forest to the sea. Based on the book by Holling C. Holling.

MIGUEL: UP FROM PUERTO RICO 16 min LCA Spanish dialogue in part liveaction 1969 (Bert Salzman/USA)
A portrait of a Puerto Rican family in New York City in which a young boy works to get a birthday present for his father. Much of the story revolves around his attempt to catch a fish. Some of the dialogue is in Spanish, some in English, and the transitions are masterfully done.

CLOSED MONDAYS 8 min PYRAMID color clay animation nonverbal 1974
A vagrant wanders into a gallery and in his drunken stupor various paintings come to life. The film was not particularly successful with my audience.

Program #10: The Full Color Day
Overall Objective: to get kids to explore the uses of color in paintings. Eighty people attended.

ORANGE AND BLUE 15 min McGRAW nonverbal liveaction 1962 (Peter Chermayeff/USA)
Two colored balls (one is orange, the other blue) move along the countryside then travel through a supply yard, a garbage dump, an abandoned house, and various industrial machines. Impeccable graphically, the film is something of a catalog of modern industrial shapes.

LITTLE BLUE AND LITTLE YELLOW 10 min McGRAW-HILL color animation 1962
Based on the book by Leo Lionni. The main characters are blotches of pure color, blue and yellow, and the story raises awareness of what happens when colors are mixed.

PATRICK 7 min WESTON color animation 1973
With joyous music and vibrant colors, this was the best film of the group for my particular goal and the age level of the audience.

PAINTINGS 10 min McGRAW-HILL color animation 1971
A mother brush and a father brush defend baby brush against a bad brush.

SERIES #2: Fall 1978
Target Audience: three- to twelve-year-olds and their parents.

Program #1: Design Time: Bring Your Own Crayons
Overall Objective: to make children feel comfortable in a museum and create an awareness of what museums are about. An additional goal was to help children explore shapes and repetition of form. One hundred fifty people attended.

DOUGHNUTS 26 min WESTON color liveaction 1964
Based on a chapter from Homer Price, by Robert McCloskey.

DANCE SQUARED 4 min IFB color nonverbal animation 1961
Rectangles and squares do a square dance in this Norman McLaren film. A good hand-clapper.

Comments: Both films worked very well for the shape activity. They were a nice contrast to each other--one was liveaction and the other animation; one was realistic and the other abstract. After viewing the films, the kids were instructed to find round, triangular, and square shapes on their bodies and to make designs using these shapes. Later, they were instructed to make designs using everything but those shapes. At the time, the museum had an exhibition from the time period of Homer Price, that is, from the 1940s, so there were many things in DOUGHNUTS that were included in photographs in the museum.

Program #2: Out of This World
Overall Objective: to introduce eight- to twelve-year-olds to subjects having to do with outer space and point of view. Ninety-one people attended.

EVOLUTION 11 min LCA color animation 1972
A funny film about how life evolved on planet Earth.

COSMIC ZOOM 8 min McGRAW kinestatic animation 1969 (Eva Szasz, Tony Ianzelo/Canada)
An exploration of the worlds within worlds in which we live. As a boy rows leisurely across a pond, the viewer is suddenly rocketed on a voyage to the outermost galaxies (the macrocosm), then zoomed back to the boy and on beneath his skin to the systems of the tiniest cells in his body (the microcosm).

WHAT ON EARTH 10 min McGRAW animation 1966 (Les Drew, Kaj Pindal/Canada)
A Martian newsreel reports on planet Earth, but the visiting Martians mistakenly identify automobiles as Earth's dominant life form.

Comments: I did a point-of-view activity, involving a discussion, after viewing the films.

Program #3: Chills and Thrills and Visit Our Own Ghost
Overall Objective: to combine a hunt for the museum's ghost, "The Flying Dutchman," with the seasonal celebration of Halloween. One Hundred fifty people attended.

GEORGIE 6 min WESTON color iconographic animation 1956
A humorous ghost tale based on the story by Robert Bright. The children were familiar with it and enjoyed it a great deal.

THE OPEN WINDOW 12 min PYRAMID color liveaction 1972
An adaptation of Saki's ghost story that was not entirely successful, in part because something happened to the film during projection, and perhaps because it was a bit too tame for this audience's expectations.

GHOSTS AND GHOULIES 21 min STERLING color liveaction 1970
A newcomer is required, as a condition of initiation into the neighborhood gang, to spend an hour in a haunted house.

Comments: GHOSTS AND GHOULIES was a particularly great lead-in for exploring the museum and looking for the ghost, "The Flying Dutchman." Kids still talk about this program.

Program #4: Animal Adventures
Overall Objective: to show a strong film program that was geared for three- to eight-year-olds and follow it with a movement activity before going into the galleries to look for animals in a crafts exhibit. Eighty-six people attended.

THE ANIMAL MOVIE 10 min NFBC nonverbal line animation 1966 (Grant Munro, Ron Tunis/Canada)
Animals move in different ways and with different rhythms, a fact this film celebrates. A child plays with a series of animals (monkey, horse, cricket, snake, pigeon, dolphin) imitating their movements.

ADVENTURES 10 min NFBC color liveaction 1967
A delightful film about a racoon who encounters many adventures exploring the world.

THE GOLDEN FISH 20 min LCA nonverbal live-action 1962 (Edmond Sechan/France)
A classic and well-paced fantasy, set in France and featuring the story of a latch-key child (played by a Vietnamese boy), his fish, and a hungry black alley cat.

THE BEAR AND THE MOUSE 8 min NFBC color liveaction 1966
A fable that shows real animals doing amazing "acting." Kids have asked to see this one again and again.

Comments: The films were great. The kids came up and imitated movements of animals and then went for an animal hunt in the crafts exhibit where there were rabbits on stained-glass windows, and elephants on teacups.

Program #5: Animated Animals, Pets, and People
Overall Objective: to show a variety of animated films as a preparation for an animation workshop the following week. Eighty-five people attended.

A CHAIRY TALE 10 min IFB nonverbal b&w pixillation 1957 (Norman McLaren/Canada)
To pulsating music by Ravi Shankar, a man tries again and again to sit on an uncooperative chair.

THE SMALLEST ELEPHANT IN THE WORLD 6 min STERLING color animation 1964
A droll tale of an undersized elephant which proves that there is a place for everyone in this world.

ROSIE'S WALK 5 min WESTON animation 1970 (Gene Deitch/Czechoslovakia)
Unflappable Rosie the hen takes a stroll around the barnyard to the country tune of "Turkey in the Straw" and outwits a hungry fox.

DICK WHITTINGTON AND HIS CAT 15 min STERLING color puppet animation 1966
The folktale of a poor boy whose affection for a stray cat leads to wealth and fame.

Program #6: An Animation Workshop
Overall Objective: to allow children, eight to fourteen years old, to make their own flipbooks after seeing a series of animated films made by both adults and children. Sixty kids attended.

OUR ART CLASS MAKES A FILM 14 min FILMFAIR liveaction and animation 1974
I was really apprehensive about showing this "documentary" but the kids really liked it. They particularly liked seeing the way a group of children close to their own age (seventh grade) made a film. They applauded a great deal.

ALEXANDER AND THE CAR WITH THE MISSING HEADLIGHT (see SERIES #1/Program #1, above)

STREET MUSIQUE 9 min LCA nonverbal line animation and liveaction 1973 (Ryan Larkin/Canada)
Pixillated shots of real street musicians form the basis for a series of metamorphic images inspired by their music. The colorful images range from psychedelic to surreal and serve as an interesting catalog of drawing styles.

Program #7: Just for Fun
Overall Objective: to show a series of films about games and fun things.

TCHOU TCHOU 15 min EBE nonverbal block animation 1972 (Co Hoedeman/Canada)
In this dramatic and well-resolved fantasy, two clever playmates (a boy and a girl) are threatened by a dragon.

TUKTU AND THE INDOOR GAMES 14 min FILMS INC color liveaction 1969
A look at the games Inuits play. The film did not work well but it may have been because the print we saw was badly scratched.

THE RI[illegible]E 7 min NFBC nonverbal pixillation 1963 (Gerald Potterton/Canada)
In this pixillated comedy of errors, a chauffer waits for his boss on a hot day.

I KNOW AN OLD LADY WHO SWALLOWED A FLY 6 min IFB song animation 1966 (Derek Lamb/Canada)
This increasingly nonsensical folksong about how one old lady tried to catch a fly is sung by Burl Ives.

Program #8: Fairytales and Legends
Overall Objectives: to show story films, particularly fairytales and legends in conjunction with an exhibition of the works of Bertha Carson Day Bates, who was an illustrator of children's books and fairytales such as Katherine Pyle's "Where the Wind Blows." Forty people attended.

LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD 6 min NFBC color animation 1968
The traditional tale.

THE OWL WHO MARRIED A GOOSE 8 min BOSUSTOW nonverbal monocolor sand animation 1976 (Caroline Leaf/Canada)
One of my all-time favorite films and, I think, one of the most effective films for programming. An authentic Inuit legend that seems to be a version of "Birds of a Feather . . . " Stout and big-eyed owl marries a goose and they bill and coo, making marvelous bird movements. They have a bunch of goslings, and when the seasons change the geese prepare to fly south. This visually stunning monochromatic film works on a nonverbal level.

MISTER FROG WENT A-COURTING 5 min FILMS INC color song cutout animation 1974
A Scottish ballad is richly animated by Evelyn Lambard and sung by Derek Lamb to a lute accompaniment.

THE TALE OF CUSTARD THE DRAGON 6 min WESTON color animation 1965
A story about a girl named Belinda and a gentle dragon named Custard.

THE LOON'S NECKLACE 11 min EBE liveaction 1949 (Crawley Films/Canada)
A Northwest Indian legend about an elderly blind man who saves his village from disaster with the help of his father, the loon. Makes excellent use of actual Indian masks. I thought kids might be bored with THE LOON'S NECKLACE, but they thoroughly enjoyed it.

Program #9: Christmas Is Coming
Overall Objective: to celebrate winter and the Christmas season. Thirty-five people attended.

THE SNOWY DAY 6 min WESTON color animation 1964
Patterns of water color and collage create strong graphic imagery for this film based on the book by Ezra Jack Keats.

IT'S SNOW 5 min NFBC color cutout animation 1974
Cutouts inspired by the shapes of snowflakes are used to create this film. During it, everybody got up and did ballet movements which worked out very well; otherwise, the film would have been lost on my group. Parents participated too, dancing in front of the screen with the children.

THE GREAT TOY ROBBERY 6 min McGRAW-HILL color animation 1963
A western cartoon starring Santa Claus.

THE CRICKET IN TIMES SQUARE 26 min XEROX color animation 1973
I was hesitant to screen this film since it is so long but the kids really wanted to see it and liked it very much.

SERIES #3: Spring 1979
Target Audience: varied for each program.

Program #1: Action Adventures--Bring Your Crayons
Overall Objective: to screen a number of films which involved journeys and have the kids create a mural backdrop for their own film by using crayons they brought from home. Forty-five people attended.

THE THREE ROBBERS 6 min WESTON color animation 1972
Based on the book by Tomi Ungerer, this is the story of three shady robbers who find an orphan in a stagecoach.

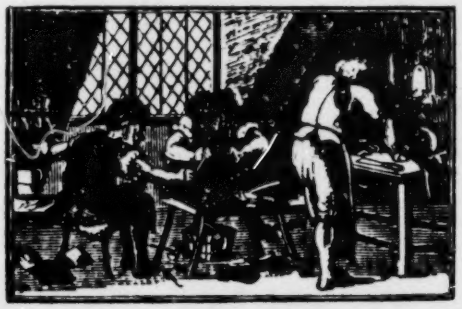
SIX PENGUINS 5 min McGRAW nonverbal puppet animation 1971 (Asporah Panov/Bulgaria)
A fable about six penguins, a whale, and a polar bear with delightful antics and visual humor.

MADELINE 10 min LCA color animation 1959
This story, from the "Madeline" series, is faithful to Ludwig Bemelman's original story and has to do with her appendix operation.

Comments: I laid out a really long sheet of craft paper and divided the kids into three groups representing THE THREE ROBBERS, SIX PENGUINS, and MADELINE, they were instructed to illustrate the background for each film. It was one of the most beautiful things the kids made and the next week it was hung in the museum for them to see.

Program #2: Puppet Show
Overall Objective: to show a traditional puppet performance (sponsored by the local Junior League) and follow it with a film using puppet animation. One hundred twenty people attended.

THE SHOEMAKER AND THE ELVES 15 min FILMS INC color puppet animation 1971
The classic fairytale done in puppet animation.



Program #3: Noisy Machines
Overall Objective: to screen a number of films that involved machinery and have kids do movement exercises which included creating machines and making their own machine noises. Thirty-five people attended.

NIGHT PEOPLE'S DAY 11 min FILMFAIR liveaction 1971 (Bob Kurtz/USA)
An exceptional catalog that gives viewers a look at real people and machines that work at night. The zany soundtrack places an amusing emphasis on the machines.

GLASS 11 min McGRAW nonverbal liveaction 1958 (Bert Haanstra/Netherlands)
A film classic that juxtaposes the ancient art of hand-blowing glass with a contemporary Dutch factory's process of making glass by machine.

THE SNEETCHES 13 min BFA color musical animation 1973
Based on the Dr. Suess book, this film is like a 1940s musical and I screened it because we had an exhibition at the time that had to do with the Forties. The first two films were wonderful, but THE SNEETCHES didn't work for movement exercises.

Program #4: People, Pictures, and Poems
Overall Objectives: to have children write poetry (with the help of poet/teacher Molly Peacock) after looking at Gertrude Kasebeir's photographs from the early 1900s. This program was made possible by a grant from the Delaware State Arts Council. Fifteen people attended. We screened no motion pictures for this particular program; kids toured the gallery and were asked to write a group poem on a photograph. They chose one of two Indians and wrote the following poem:

I think the big man is about thirty-six./ And the middle-sized man is about twenty-nine./ They're in a house by a window./ They look like they're doing a seance./ They look like they're talking to ghosts./ They look like they're saying "Hi!"/ But the ghosts say "Boo!"/ They ask the spirit about why he sentenced a man to death./ Then they ask each other/ "Why do we sit in a house instead of a tent?"/ Maybe it's raining out and the tent got broke./ Maybe they're singing a rain song to the spirit./ They ask the spirit to bring out the sun/ and make the sky blue/ and make the clouds soak up all the water/ and then they'll send the spirit back./ The spirit will live in the future/ and the Indian men will live in the valley/ and they will plant their corn.

Program #5: Acting Out
Overall Objective: to show films that had to do with children who had to solve their own problems and have the kids do various activities, including acting out, as a follow-up. Fifty people attended.

SAND (OR PETER AND THE WOLF) 10 min PHOENIX nonverbal b&w sand animation 1969 (Caroline Leaf/ USA)
The poignant exploration of a child's mastery over his fear of the dark woods and a predatory wolf. This gripping film is loosely based on the story of "Peter and the Wolf"; the contemporary electronic score, however, bears no resemblance to Prokofiev's.

HANSEL AND GRETEL, AN APPALACHIAN VERSION 16 min DAVENPORT liveaction 1975 (Tom Davenport/ USA)
Davenport's fast-paced and gripping treatment of the traditional Grimm Brothers' tale of survival has been relocated to Southern Appalachia and set in the 1930s' depression. It effectively captures the dark side of childhood and lays it to rest when meek Gretel takes action.

Comments: After seeing the films, the children split into three groups, with parents and volunteers helping. The youngest group, ages three to five, created scary pictures. The middle group, ages six to eight, worked on mapping out a route to Hansel and Gretel's house. The oldest group, ages nine to twelve, selected a part of the story in which Hansel and Gretel showed self-reliance and, to my narration, they acted it out together. They all played Hansel and they all played Gretel. In acting out, the children were using all their senses and in the discussion which followed they realized that when they use their senses fully they can't really be lost. This was one of my most successful programs. It was a fine collaborative effort; each group had an activity appropriate for their age and each had an audience.

Program #6: Old-time Legends--American Storytelling
Overall Objective: to show stories that would relate to the museum's collection which is, in large part, an American collection. Fifty people attended.

THE LEGEND OF SLEEPY HOLLOW 14 min PYRAMID color animation 1972
Ichabod Crane courts Katrina van Tassel and encounters the Headless Horseman in this colorful cartoon of Washington Irving's story.

THE LEGEND OF PAUL BUNYAN 11 min BOSUSTOW color animation 1973
A tall tale about Paul Bunyan and his blue ox, Babe. A pleasant, if rough-and-tumble, bit of Americana.

THE LEGEND OF JOHN HENRY 11 min BOSUSTOW song cel animation 1974 (Sam Weiss/USA)
The human resistance to mechanization is embodied in railroad worker John Henry, a powerful black steel driver. The ballad voiceover to this impressionistic, watercolor-looking animation is sung by Roberta Flack.

Comments. There was no activity programmed with this screening since I was on vacation.

Program #7: Puppets, Billboards, and Billboard Puppets
Overall Objective: to teach scale through an unusual puppet and arts activity. Puppeteer Debra Frasier helped with this particular program which was made possible by a grant from the Delaware State Arts Council. Seventy-five people attended.

THE LATE GREAT AMERICAN PICNIC 7 min BAILEY nonverbal liveaction 1978 (Dan Bailey/USA)
This delightfully original and funny film has no plot but it's fun to watch familiar billboard puppets mobilized by real people.

Comments: Although it was targeted for children from six to twelve, children from three to twelve came with their parents. (We showed a fourteen-minute version of THE LATE GREAT AMERICAN PICNIC, rather than the shorter and final seven-minute version.) The Pop Eye props were a great success.

Program #8: Food Films--Old Fashioned Taffy Pull
Overall Objective: to find an activity that related to an exhibit from the period 1890-1940 an a family food program at the musuem. Forty people attended.

DRAGON STEW 14 min BFA color animation 1972
Based on the book by Tom McGowen, this is a trickster tale with a satisfying resolution.

LEOPOLD THE SEE-THROUGH CRUMBPICKER 9 min WESTON color animation 1971
A little girl makes friends with an invisible animal whose appetite gets her in trouble until she finds a way to solve the problem.

LICKETY-SPLIT LICORICE 8 min STERLING color nonverbal liveaction 1972
A boy and girl make licorice in their kitchen--a very sticky situation.

HANK THE CAVE PEANUT 14 min YELLOW BISON object animation 1974 (Ron McAdow/USA)
A droll study of the cave peanut civilization. The only other life form, besides the peanut, is the wild fork.

Comments: We followed the films by having a peanut hunt in the galleries which worked very well. Originally, I planned to do a taffy pull, but wisely thought better of it; I brought in licorice instead, but that upset some parents who didn't want their children to have sugar.

Program #9: Conducting
Overall Objective: to show a series of energizing films and have the kids mime conducting each other as a follow-up activity. Seventy-five people attended.

THE CONCERT 12 min PYRAMID nonverbal liveaction 1974 (Claude Chagrin/United Kingdom)
An unusual concert pianist plays the street markings with his feet behind Albert Hall in London. A black and white painted crosswalk becomes his piano--but playing al fresco has its problems and the elements conspire against the artist, resulting in some wonderful slapstick.

THE FOOLISH FROG 8 min WESTON song animation 1973 (Gene Deitch/USA)
Pete Seeger sings the song about a foolish frog who got himself all puffed up with pride and caused a big commotion in his local community.

THE SHOUT IT OUT ALPHABET 10 min PHOENIX color nonverbal animation 1969
The title is a directive and kids shout out the delightfully animated images and letters as they appear and rapidly disappear from the screen.

Program #10: Dance with Maida Withers
Overall Objective: to show films that would work well with dance and movement activities. Maida Withers is a dancer from Washington, and the program was made possible by a grant from the Delaware State Arts Council. Thirty-five people attended.

COLTER'S HELL 14 min PHOENIX nonverbal live-action 1973 (Robin Lehman/USA)
This arresting nature film takes a careful, quiet look at the Yellowstone geysers in winter. The film as a whole is structured like a piece of music, and absolutely requires participation. The film worked particularly well for this activity. We stopped it at points, danced for a while, started it again and talked about it while it was on. Later on, we stopped it and danced, and so on, until the film was over.

A CHAIRY TALE (see SERIES #2/Program #5, above)

Comments: This time, after viewing the film, we suggested that children go home and dance with a chair. The program as a whole was very successful. We didn't show the films in a "theatrical" way but used them as things to dance with.

DISTRIBUTORS

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movies for mainstreaming: captioned children's films

by salvatore parlato

You're a new teacher, or at least you feel like one, because there in your class -- for the first time in your life -- sits a deaf student. Where to begin? What should you do? How to communicate without isolating or favoring the deaf child? Among the many helpful programs and approaches available, visual media serve as an important unifying resource.

Deafness is not only the absence of hearing, it is also the dependence on vision. Sight-reliance is a good rationale for using film with deaf learners -- a factor which becomes doubly (maybe geometrically) important in trying to communicate with both deaf and hearing children. Thus, visual media can be an important unifying resource in a "mainstreamed" classroom.

Films with subtitles are available free of charge from Captioned Films for the Deaf (CFD), a service of the Bureau for the Education of the Handicapped, Department of Education. The CFD catalog carries over 900 titles covering the major units of study between preschool and senior high (there are also quite a few selections for Adult Education), and the collection is growing by seventy-five to ninety titles a year.

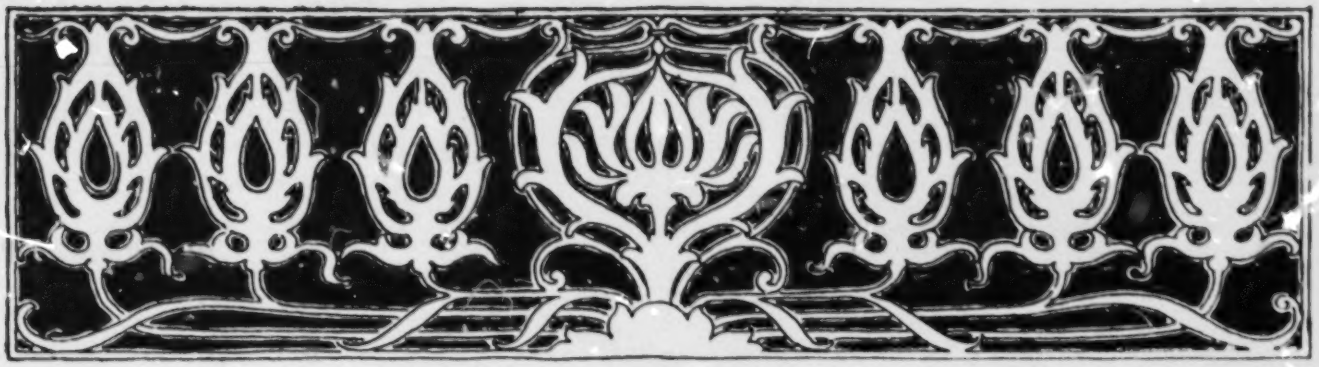
The only charge for use of CFD films is for return postage. To be eligible for free captioned films, a class need have only one deaf student, but the school must apply for film privileges. There are sixty CFD libraries located around the country; contact the CFD Distribution Center in Washington for the address of the nearest one. Registration should originate from the library-media center, principal, or superintendent.

Registration information and catalogs can be obtained from:

Captioned Films for the Deaf
Distribution Center
5134 Wisconsin Avenue NW
Washington DC 20016
202/363-1308

For further information call or write:

USOE-BEH Captioned Films
Rochester School for the Deaf
1545 St. Paul Street
Rochester NY 14621
716/338-7620
Salvatore J. Parlato, Nat'l Coordinator



a wealth of information

two seminars on children's media

by barbara weber

Two seminars on children's media sponsored by the Media Center for Children (MCC) were held in June 1980. On June 12th, "A Special Audience with Special Needs," featured speakers Martha Barnes, Susan Delson, Hope Lunin Klapper, Jennifer Lawson, Richard Lewis, and Burt Supree. The June 19th seminar, "Treatment and Concept in Children's Media," included speakers Jane and Peter Chermayeff, Tom Davenport, Marilyn Iarusso, Gerald McDermott, Catherine Mercier, Laurie Meringoff, Jane Morrison, Eli Noyes Jr., Leona Schauble, and Steve Segal. Although the focus of each seminar was different, the dominant issues overlapped.

Reports on Research

Reports from several researchers were an important aspect of the seminars. Though involved with diverse projects and objectives, these panelists share a keen interest in discovering more about children and their responses to media. Hope Lunin Klapper, author/researcher and Associate Professor of Sociology at New York University, spoke about children's perceptions, primarily in terms of television. "Many producers (including prestigious Prix Jeunnese winners) have no idea how children perceive their products; this in analogous," Klapper continued, "to someone who builds a carburetor then never takes it on the road to test it."

Klapper's evaluative research addresses the question of how children perceive and how their perceptions differ from adults' (even when they view the same program). Klapper has discovered that children are not a passive audience. They make moral judgments, though childlike; they make inferences, and bring preferences to their media viewing. Children ages seven to ten perceive episodically, often missing motives and not perceiving causes and effects. Younger children miss irony, subtlety or abstractions, and as often as not focus on irrelevant details. Klapper illustrated this point: A "Daktari" episode several years ago used the plight of a caged, wild dog to highlight the situation of a tribal boy brought to a civilized area; in Klapper's research, no child watching the show mentioned the similarity of the plight of the dog and that of the boy. (MCC has encountered similar results with films which use animal analogies for human problems; see the review of CHINO'S TALE, directed by Robert Deubel, Film Review Supplement 1:2.) When inferences are implicit rather than explicit, children seem largely unable to make connections.

"Children, like adults," Klapper noted, "also perceive differently from one another; the problem with children's media is that adults too often think children understand materials in a way they clearly do not."

Leona Schauble, Assistant Director of Research for "Sesame Street," has come across the same problem in her television production research. Schauble repeated the importance of being explicit and told participants, "the way children perceive should not be a guessing game." She then addressed filmmakers and suggested general guidelines for identifying and developing theme in educational materials:

1) Identify your audience. If you are aiming at an age range, identify the bull's-eye target audience.

2) Determine how your proposed subject is important for the target age group. What do they know or want to know about the subject? Talk to teachers, educators, and children. Look at the work of other filmmakers.

3) Have a concrete objective. Write down, clearly, what you want children to get out of the film.

4) Make sure the message rests in the visual, not the aural; children under the age of seven may not process the aural at all. Avoid language which is too difficult for your audience; puns for preschoolers don't work.

5) Avoid visual and verbal clutter. Be wary of complex techniques. Use a format suited to what you want to say and make sure it doesn't work against the message. For example, children ages seven to ten prefer plotted drama to magazine formats.

6) Make the message explicit and repeat it in several contexts. Use child voice-overs rather than adult narration.

7) Make sure the story's resolution is as exciting as the conflict. Action must go somewhere, but the values, particularly with affective messages, should be in the action. Young children like semi-predictable outcomes, so give them a chance to anticipate.

"With children over ten " Schauble explained, "conflict and fear can be fairly direct. They love action -- especially here-and-now action, stories which emphasize emotional appeal (animal stories), and novel images; they hate didactic speeches and are rarely interested in adult characters unless, somehow, the story or issue relates directly to them." She closed by saying that older children enjoy process, "they like to see things being made or put together."

Books and Film

An interesting study at the Harvard Graduate School of Education is being conducted by Project Zero. Laurie Meringoff, Research Associate, is examining the influence of different mediums on children's appreciation of story. Meringoff has discovered that when children watch a film version of a story, they remember action and movement details. When a story is read to them and they follow illustrations, children remember figurative language, verbal phrases and dialogue, and go outside the story to their own personal experience.

Project Zero's research is trying to answer other questions as well: Why should stories be illustrated with moving pictures? Do children process visual images meaningfully? How is this meaning distinctive for having been visualized? Do children come away from oral presentations of stories with visual images?

Meringoff summed up by saying that the basis of her project lies in discovering how children are using the information given to them. She suggested we should expect from each medium only what it is able to deliver -- give unto film that which is film's (the ability to expand the visual), and unto books that which are books' (the appreciation of language).

The link between books and film was explored by other speakers. Martha Barnes, Children's Services consultant from Westchester Library System, discussed the problem of adapting books to film, citing examples of how adaptations do or don't work. MANDY'S GRANDMOTHER, by Liesel Moak Skorpen, takes about five minutes to read, but the film runs for twenty minutes -- too long for the intended age group. Barnes quoted a rule of thumb developed by Tom Daveport, "A film should run as long as it takes to read the story." She suggested that another way to calculate film length would be to allow 1½ to 2 minutes per year of child's age, then made an interesting point, "the book format is an intimate, one-to-one experience, while film viewing is a group process; this difference often changes the meaning and impact of the story."

Barnes discussed the "ABC After School Specials," which often adapt so-called problem books with strong messages; many of these adaptations apparently don't work well as films for children and tend to be watched by homemakers instead. The television adaptation of the popular book by Louise Fitzhugh, Nobody's Family Is Going To Change (retitled THE TAP DANCE KID), illustrates one of Barnes' pet peeves. The film had a new focus, and a radically different, up-beat ending -- one which in no way matched the book's depth and truth. "Too often," she remarked, "when good books make the trip to television, they are unnecessarily changed to fit into its predictable format."

Marilyn Iarusso, author and Assistant Coordinator for the Children's Services of the New York Public Library (NYPL), talked about the library's evaluation and selection of films for children. Selection criteria have evolved without any particular knowledge of developmental psychology; they are, however, based on values derived from experience. Joy, empathy, and adventure are primary criteria; librarians, unlike classroom teachers, are not looking to use films as a tool.

Basically, the NYPL film selection committee believes that children ages six to twelve:

- perceive films literally and concretely,
- don't make connections which aren't explicit,
- prefer films featuring animals (rather than people, especially adults),
- are interested in other children if children in a film are doing something interesting,
- respond to a well structured (ordered) film, since creating an orderly perception of the world is part of a developing child's life task, and
- don't have to be tricked into becoming interested, if the subject concerns them.

Iarusso reiterated that adults should be aware of how children perceive and the kinds of connections young viewers make. To illustrate this point, she screened a segment from THE HUNDRED PENNY BOX, by Pieter Van Deusen, about a young black boy and his grandmother. Adapted from a book, the film is visually appealing, but too difficult for children to comprehend. "Being an allegory," Iarusso said, "connections are implicit rather than explicit and the film has been a hit with elderly groups, not children."

Jennifer Lawson, National Director of the Film Fund in New York, and author of several children's books, showed clips from THE TAP DANCE KID, directed by Barra Grant, and THE SEVEN WISHES OF JOANNA PEABODY, directed by Stephen Foreman. While she,

PEABODY, directed by Stephen Foreman. While she, too, touched briefly on the problem of adaptation, she focused primarily on the images of, and messages about, minorities. "Too often," Lawson pointed out, "minority groups' exotic aspects, or their poverty, are overemphasized; too often, socioeconomic aspects become central to the storyline instead of being incidental. Like sexism, ethnic prejudice remains institutionalized in our society, and films, sometimes despite the best intentions, continue to promote stereotypes. Rarely do they portray minorities solving their own dilemmas. Instead, films typically show a benevolent non-black, for example, solving conflicts for black characters. There are too few films in which minority youth are portrayed where their race, national origin or color are secondary."

A comment from a participant raised the point that politics often complicates the decision of what to show, and with so few films for minorities, even stereotypical films continually get requested. "It is a difficult situation," acknowledged Lawson, "but the only way out is to improve the images of minorities in film. If filmmakers would consult directly with respective groups, such as the Black Filmmakers Foundation in New York City, or the Black Film Institute in Washington DC, this in itself, would make a big difference."

Jane Morrison exemplified Lawson's advice. An independent filmmaker, whose credits include THE WHITE HERON, she is presently at work on a film about a Puerto Rican girl and has spent a great deal of time asking for and getting input from consultants. "If you consult with 'experts' about a film," Morrison said, "the best that can happen is that the film gets more levels; the worst that can happen is the film becomes more pointed." LOS DOS MUNDOS DE ANGELITA, adapted from a picture book (Angelita, by Wendy Kesselman), concerns the problems of immigration from a young girl's point of view. As a source, the book was problematic since too many of the pictures could not be directly translated to the screen. But Morrison's perseverance (what she calls "the right kind of obstinacy") paid off, and most of the problems have been worked out. Although other changes will no doubt need to be made, Morrison is not worried. "That's one of the advantages of being an independent," she commented, "you can be flexible."

Don't Underestimate Kids

Susan Delson, former Director of the Chicago Children's Film Center (CCFC) and a children's film consultant, discussed what she considers one of the most bothersome problems with children's media: underestimating children (particularly those aged eight to twelve). "Children," Delson told participants, "have a respect for the complexity of life that media often ignores." A film can be a complete experience for young viewers, Delson noted, especially if the filmmaker follows two principles: "make the film as rich as possible and leave things out." She advised leaving the central conflict somewhat open since "predictable happy endings are usually disastrous. Leaving room for children to bring something to the film is like allowing them to unwrap a gift by themselves." Two films which succeed in these apparently conflicting directives were screened (SKINNY AND FATTY and WILD GREEN THINGS IN THE CITY). Both films go beyond standard treatments and standard resolutions; neither underestimated kids.

Burt Supree, Dance and Children's Theater critic for the Village Voice and author of several children's books, urged filmmakers to go beyond simple resolutions of conflict. "In a play or film, a conflict is set up and dealt with," Supree said, "but a good work is dependent on how well the conflict is resolved." He implored filmmakers to take greater risks, to really say something to their audiences -- "something about reality (if you like), but something about the truths and feelings that drama was designed to express." Supree also reminded participants that details are extremely important, and regreted that so much acting in children's media is mediocre. "This sort of acting," noted Supree, "generates a sense that feelings are what they look like, instead of focusing attention on inner qualities."

Richard Lewis, educator, Director of the Touchstone Center, and compiler of children's writings, spoke about the abundance of imagination and creativity within the child's mind. "Adults," he said, "haven't yet discovered the potential of children because our culture has not yet discovered it. We have a nation that, unforunately, does not respect children or the infinite richness of a child's mind. If we did, we wouldn't keep feeding them overdone and overcooked media."

In contrast to the findings of some researchers, Lewis finds children are capable of great imagination, great richness, of making connections, and of filling in what is left out. They are also imbued with another essential artistic ingredient: naiveté. "Children," he remarked, "have a natural grasp on this quality." He documented his statements by reading the following poem by five-year-old Hilary-Anne Farley from his collection of poems written by children, Miracles:

A Little Fish

A little fish swims in the water
With the mummy fish. But camels don't
Go in water, and see the sun rising, a
fish and the fish
Go right in their little house and snuggle up.
See the gold? I love the little fish!
I love them all.
But be careful when you swim in the water
there might be fish,
Or even whales or alligators.

When the sun rises again and all is done
I love the little fish but what can I do?
The whales will eat them
And the sun goes up again.

Lewis summarized by stating that "part of a child's struggle is to make connections. Because it deals with images, film can help with that struggle. If we can respect children's own very rich sense of imagery, their own wonderful sense of the poetic, then adults will be able to create films that address the artist within each child."

An Artist's Sensibility

Gerald McDermott, creator of award-winning animated films and picture books, is deeply concerned with the subject of art and artists. McDermott questioned the uses of art and bemoaned the fact that art or television, for example, is too often used for other purposes; "purposes that masquerade as art but are, in truth, social engineering." McDermott commented that artists today are under constant pressure to conform to pedantic notions, "...but what I want to give my audience can't be tested for." He wants to give viewers "a sense of silent wonder" and does this by making "pictures of the soul." All of McDermott's films, from THE STONECUTTER to ARROW TO THE SUN, deal with age-old themes of journeys and self-transformation and although the stories are universal (not particularly childlike), even young children enjoy them.

Tom Davenport has made a number of documentary films on folktale subjects, as well as two film translations of the Grimm Brothers' fairytales "Hansel and Gretel" and "Rapunzel"; he is presently at work on "The Frog Prince." Davenport's liveaction folktales are, in many ways, pictures of the psyche. "In

studying 'Hansel and Gretel,' I realized that despite its unrealistic and dreamlike qualities the reason for its survival is that the tale presents an archetype: an emotionally realistic description of a universal human experience."

As artists, filmmakers need Davenport's kind of insight as well as a good intuition about what is necessary for their films -- a position which leaves them very vulnerable. Davenport related an interesting story (especially in light of earlier comments about consulting), regarding his film RAPUNZEL, RAPUNZEL. Criticisms from adults pressured him into making slight changes in the film, resulting in two versions (both in distribution). Interestingly, however, when MCC tested both versions with children, most preferred the original version, which showed the Prince's bloody eyes. Children said that in the second version, Davenport "told us instead of showed us" what were, for them, very important details. Davenport's experience with RAPUNZEL, RAPUNZEL emphasized the problems that can arise from ignorance of children's preferences and of how they perceive.

CLAY, ALPHABET, and THE FABLE OF HE AND SHE are among Eli Noyes' best known films. Noyes reminded participants that a filmmaker acts not only out of his/her own needs as an artist, but out of economic needs as well. He is currently working on a pilot for Warner Amex Cable on children's dreams. He has collected and transcribed children's dreams (which are very much like fairytales in their complexity of plot and symbol) and is busy developing an appropriate technique for presenting them.

The Sad, Sad Truth . . .

Despite the importance of laughter in our lives, despite the rich complexity of good comedy, people dismiss humorous material as a low form of art. Worse yet, adults (particularly educators) tend to ignore its importance for chilren. Two independent filmmakers, Michael Siporin and Steve Segal, are working to alter this unfortunate situation. Siporin, whose works include JOKING: NO LAUGHING MATTER and HOW TO EAT, presented himself as a commercial for laughter. He made a plea for humor (see his interview in this issue), and answered the question of how he knows what's funny by telling participants that he remembers being a child and enjoying a good laugh!

Steve Segal also remembers what he enjoyed as a child. His passion was comic books and he has transferred that passion to animated films. Segal says that although he makes films after his own vision, he's not surprised children love his work. "Humor," Segal commented, "is important to me and I strive to present a depiction of delight."

The Process of Patient Watching

To have a vision, one needs to start with an idea. Jane and Peter Chermayeff described how they arrived at the idea for "Silent Safari," their excellent nonverbal animal documentary series. While Jane was studying anthropology at Harvard, she noticed how successful non-narrated films on animal behavior were, and how extraneous narration seemed in others. Not only did the interpretive comments become quickly outdated, but they intruded on the overall experience.

The Chermayeffs approached Encyclopaedia Britannica (EBE) about making several films on African animals. With contract and advance in hand they spent several months in Africa getting the footage they needed, which involved "a process of patient watching." Initially when EBE executives saw the edited films, they did not share the Chermayeff's feeling that the films worked best non-verbally and requested a narrator. To make their point that narration would be superfluous, the Chermayeffs showed the EBE people an anthropology film on Inuit family life "...so rich that it would be diminished by a narrator."

The importance of patient watching is not reserved for animals alone. Like the Chermayeffs, Catherine Mercier has learned how to look, particularly at contemporary children and humanity's relation to nature. In this quest, she has made a number of sensitive films, including WILD GREEN THINGS IN THE CITY and METAMORPHOSIS. Mercier's goal is not to teach, but to ignite children's curiosity so they can learn about things for themselves. She allows neighborhood children to participate as partners in the filmmaking experience. Her advice for filmmakers is to "listen to the children you're working with."

A Special Screening

The June Seminars were scheduled to coincide with a week-long screening at the Whitney Museum of American Art, programmed by Maureen Gaffney, Director of MCC, with a dual purpose -- to honor the selected filmmakers, and by screening their innovative works, to generate enthusiasm for children's film. The hour-long program consisted of the following works:

BAD DOG (1973) by Eliot Noyes, Jr.
SAND (OR PETER AND THE WOLF) (1969) by Caroline Leaf
METAMORPHOSIS (1977) by Catherine Mercier
THE STONECUTTER (1965) by Gerald McDermott
CHEETAH (1972) by Peter and Jane Chermayeff
RED BALL EXPRESS (1975) by Steve Segal
HANSEL AND GRETEL, AN APPALACHIAN VERSION (1975) by Tom Davenport

On June 19th, a Gallery Talk followed an afternoon screening and the largely adult audience had an opportunity to question the filmmakers. Some not unexpected questions were asked: What about the violence (referring to the hunt in CHEETAH)? What about the harmful effect of portraying a mean stepmother (in HANSEL AND GRETEL)? Aren't abstract images (in THE STONECUTTER) too difficult for children? Gaffney responded. "Unfortunately, objecting to violence seems to be an almost Pavlovian response to children's material, but issues of violence (or abstraction) cannot be considered outside of the context in which they are found -- context and treatment are all important!" After testing the films with children, Gaffney believes that the films in question handle their subjects in a way which makes the issues meaningful.

We Are Rich

The June seminars at MCC had a dual purpose: to stimulate both discussion and creative thinking. Certainly they succeeded in their first goal, for the level of discussion was intelligent and complex. One hopes that experiences such as these seminars, which were funded in part by the New York State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts, will result in creative solutions to producing and using children's media.

As Tom Davenport got ready to come to the seminar (he told us) his wife, Mimi, suggested that instead of lamenting the plight of independent filmmakers who typically complain about how poor they are, Tom should talk about how rich he is -- how rich his life and work have made him.

In the two seminars, as well as at the Whitney screening, I saw no poverty. I saw only a wealth of images and heard a wealth of ideas. As the final presentation drew to a close, I couldn't help agreeing with Mimi Davenport -- we were all rich, even richer than we'd been before.

the true confessions of a funny filmmaker:

an interview with michael siporin

by maureen gaffney

I grew up in Chicago and got a graduate degree in drawing from Southern Illinois University. Now I teach filmmaking at Montclair State College in the Film Production program, write "Spidey" comics for Children's Television Workshop's "Electric Company," and do cartoons. But generally, whatever I make over and above my rent and basic living costs goes into film production. And generally I make short liveaction comedy films.

WERE YOU FUNNY AS A KID?

Oh yes, I always loved to be funny, to draw cartoons. I even wanted to be a comedian; I tried out for the "Ted Mack Amateur Hour" when I was eight.

WHAT DID YOU THINK WAS FUNNY AS A KID?

Robert Benchley. HOW TO EAT is really something of a Benchley piece. I think my father was familiar with him, but I'm not really sure how I learned about Benchley. My guess is that I saw him on some films. Generally, I didn't read a lot as a kid, but I'll bet that by the time I was fifteen I had read most of the compilations of his articles from the New Yorker which I got from the library. It's strange because Benchley was not of my generation. I grew up in the early fifties and was conscious of stuff like "Pogo." I was a great fan of Mad magazine. People sometimes compare my films to Monty Python comedy, but that's not were my stuff comes from.

WHAT WERE YOUR OTHER COMIC SOURCES?

Sid Caesar, of course. And Ernie Kovaks. I loved their satirical skits. And cartoons--Tex Avery was one of my favorites. He did these sort of diagrammatic gags--which I like to do, although I've kind of extended it. There were also Daffy Duck cartoons, before the mid-fifties, at which point they started getting bad. And I liked the UPA stuff, but I don't think UPA cartoons were as funny as I wanted them to be.

HOW DID YOU BEGIN TO MAKE FUNNY FILMS?

Being a comedian never worked out. When I would try for the play I would never make it, but I got a lot of encouragement to be a painter, to do something in the arts.

I went to Southern Illinois University and had some great teachers--Buckminster Fuller was there--who encouraged me to do my cartooning, at least indirectly. Perhaps because SIU had a Bauhaus tradition, I began thinking about film.

WHEN DID YOU COME TO NEW YORK?

In 1967, at the end of the avant-garde "scene" that gathered around Jonas Mekas and the New York film community, when there was still a tremendous interest in film. There were showings all around the city at that time. Little theaters would pop up in the most unlikely places. Even on 42nd Street, in-between the porno houses, there was a real art cinema. Of course, that was part of the attraction of the underground film; it was promoted as if it were not unlike the pornographic movies on either side, when in fact the avant-garde films were quite different. I got a wonderful education just trying to see everything I could. I was also strongly influenced by Fellini, Bergman, and LAST YEAR AT MARIENBAD.

WHAT DID YOU LIKE ABOUT THEM?

For someone who is working on comedy films, I have a strong interest in images. Until I saw ...MARIENBAD, I thought there was nothing new you could do in film. I had this same feeling with the Fellini films; I had no idea what they were about, but I loved them. I loved their imagery.

LA STRADA was the first Fellini film I saw. Its surreal images--horses suddenly appearing out of nowhere, strange children running around, turning to look at the camera, wearing strange costumes--were so exciting.

My favorite cartoons--and I don't limit that to movie cartoons--are those that are fantastical. For me, that's the powerful stuff. The stuff that can't be done on a theatrical stage--things like "Little Nemo in Slumberland."

YOU KNEW McCAY'S WORK AS A KID?

No, and I'm sorry I didn't. I'm just now learning about McCay and "Barney Google" which is one of the funniest strips imaginable. I should have been exposed to those guys. I just didn't know about the history of cartoons, because our society doesn't value it.

WHAT THEMES DO YOU DEAL WITH?

THE RITZ NEWSIOLA and THE USED NEWS are both pointing out how silly the news is. The editorial where the rooster simply clucks for a minute or so is a parody of most television editorials. I made them both in black and white, so they would look like old newsreels.

WHY NEWSREELS?

I'm a news addict. I always loved the news--my father made me interested--and I still am. As a kid, I saw newsreels in movie houses. I loved them. As I remembered them, the newsreels were packed with information and entertainment.

HOW DO YOU CONCEPT YOUR GAGS?

I usually work with one other person. I collaborated with Michael Solomon in the NEWSIOLA. When we were writing it, I said, "How about a storm?" He suggested a snow storm, then we just started bouncing ideas off each other, trying to make each other laugh. A snow storm doesn't make you laugh--but a shoe storm does. It was easy to conceptualize, but how do you visualize it? In a way I don't worry about that. If it's funny, I want to try it, then the problems arise in figuring out how to make the shoe storm happen on film. My favorite shot in the shoe storm is when someone is driving along in a car with the wipers going, and shoes are pelting the windshield.

JOKING: NO LAUGHING MATTER was loosely based on Freud's book Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious. Freud's jokes, his illustrations of the principles underlying joking, were so awful, so unfunny, that they made me laugh. I decided it would make a funny film--to take this subject and treat it seriously. At least the film started out as a version of Freud's book, but once I started writing it, it became something quite different.

SEEING IS BELIEVING will be something like Ripley's Believe It or Not or the Guinness Book of Records. It's full of funny tricks, things that are just impossible--and because they're impossible, they're funny. And they're things that can't be done on a stage. They belong in cartoons, comic strips, and in funny films. It relates to Melière. It's that kind of magical stuff.

ARE YOU TAKEN SERIOUSLY AS A FILMMAKER?

I find myself somewhere in-between the independent film community and the commercial world--somewhere in the middle. In the so-called "independent film world" comedy films are not generally well received. Serious filmmakers and serious film viewers seem to take themselves very seriously--humor and comedy seem unacceptable. But outside of the experimental, independent cinema I run into other troubles. Because my works are comedies, people look for some form to place them into. When they don't conform to their expectations, they won't accept the film on its own terms. Many people tend to dismiss comedy that isn't formularized.

BUT WE NEED COMEDY . . .

That may be one of the reasons I've been encouraged to do my comic films. People would see HOW TO EAT and literally fall off their chairs laughing. It was real, tangible feedback, almost like evidence.

HOW TO EAT 6 min (1963/64) Grove Press Films
THE RITZ NEWSIOLA 3 parts @ 6 min each (1974)
Picture Start 204½ W John St Champaign IL 61820
THE USED NEWS 5 parts Produced for "Electric Company" (1975)
JOKING: NO LAUGHING MATTER 17 min (1977)
Picture Start
SEEING IS BELIEVING 10 min (1980)
Siporin Films 344 West 14 St New York NY 10014

(Bunkin continued)

This quick vocabulary lesson was followed by a screening of two cameraless animations, Steve Segal's RED BALL EXPRESS and Jorge Toro's THE MAWKISH PIDDLER. The children were asked to note the quality of movement that this technique produced. I set up the workshops so that in five sessions the participants would be introduced to three different techniques. Each session culminated in a screening of the group film we had make.

The first animation was created by scratching off emulsion from unprocessed negative film. In the second workshop, we added color to the original film and re-viewed the completed movie with an appreciation of the enhancing effects of color. This served as a transition to the next project, which was done in the same workshop: children drew with colored line markers on bleached film. At first, participants were encouraged to simply experiment with lines, dots, shapes, and scribbles. We actually finished the film in the third session, when their task was to make a sequence, drawn frame by frame, that showed a motion.

In session four, we taped a soundtrack for the second film (which consisted of our remarks as we watched the film) and started our third film with the introduction of another technique: collage directly onto bleached film. Children used prestype letters and borders, which adhere well to film, combined with direct on-film drawing and produced beautiful graphic images.

Our fifth and last session tied up all the loose ends. We completed our production, screened it and voted on a title. One participant suggested the title should be a nonsense word made up of the initials of those who worked on the film, GLFETRBDOF.

These filmmaking workshops provided children with many insights about both the art of film and about work in general. In the filmmaker's world, teamwork is essential. Since a disproportionate effort is necessary to produce a few seconds of film, the children learned the importance of patience and cooperation. They also learned that inventiveness and variety were important for making their movies exciting: They could not do the same thing repeatedly because it would result in a boring film.

Over the course of the five sessions, a subtle change occurred in the participants' attitudes; because their experience with animation was based on commercial television cartoons, they had expected to make films with a clear story. But cameraless animation, which does not lend itself easily to traditional cartoon styles or stories, changed their ideas about what to expect from film. And although at first they became absorbed in the process of making and screening their results, the children grew more appreciative of the purely visual effects they were able to achieve. The more they experimented, the more control they had over the medium, so that the image they wanted was the image projected. The children no longer assumed that movies had to be narrative; in fact, they learned to appreciate film as an art form in itself.

FILMOGRAPHY

DANCE SQUARED 4 min color nonverbal animation (Norman McLaren/1961) Distributed by International Film Bureau, Chicago.

THE LIGHT FANTASTIC PICTURE SHOW 7 min color animation (J. P. & Lillian Somersaulter/1974) Distributed by Films Incorporated, Wilmette IL.

A LITTLE GIRL AND A GUNNY WOLF 6 min color animation (Steve & Marion Klein/1971) Distributed by AIMS Instructional Media, Glendale CA.

THE MAWKISH PIDDLER 4 min color nonverbal cameraless animation (Jorge Toro/1971) Available from Young Filmmakers, 4 Rivington Street, New York NY 10002.

MATRIOSKA 5 min color nonverbal puppet animation (Co Hoedman/1971) Distributed by McGraw Hill Films, Del Mar CA.

RED BALL EXPRESS 3 min color nonverbal cameraless animation (Steve Segal/1975) Distributed by Perspective Films, Chicago.

WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE 8 min color animation (Gene Deitch/1973) Distributed by Weston Woods Studios, Weston CT.